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Why I Believe In Immortality

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A Sermon Delivered at the
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"WHY I BELIEVE IN IMMORTALITY"

"Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed."—John 20:29.

Eight days after Easter there was assembled in an upper room in Jerusalem almost the same group which had sat together at the Lord's Supper. There were at least two absentees: Judas who had hanged himself and Jesus who had been hung on a cross. The center of the company on this occasion was Thomas. He was holding forth as to his doubts concerning the resurrection of the Christ. Nothing could convince him, he said, except the actual placing of his fingers in the prints of the nails. But as they communed together, a Presence made himself so vividly felt, that the doubting Thomas exclaimed "My Lord and My God." Whereupon the returned and risen Lord said, "Because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed."

Multitudes who accept Christ's words here as authentic do not seem to accept his point of view. They do not appear to regard it as more blessed to believe in the resurrected life without seeing, than it would be to have given us the evidence of sight. Most of us besiege the gates of death with our wishes for a glimpse of those "we have loved long since and lost awhile." We feel at times that we would give almost anything for a word with our departed. We are toward death like prisoners of hope who keep running from window to window of our little cells peering through the bars to catch if possible a passing gleam of light. If we could only know about the life beyond the grave as we know about this one with our five physical senses, what a comfort it would be. So we think. But, no, says the Christ. It is not so, "Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed."

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This is the Easter Beatitude. When we learned the Beatitudes in our childhood, we memorized the list in the Sermon on the Mount. And many of us have never added this one which was caught by John. I wish this Easter morning that we might be able to commit this added Beatitude not merely to memory but to life.

And yet I do not wish to preach it to you. I share with you a distaste for the word preaching. The word savors of moral patronizing and propaganda. It suggests the effort to hand down some advice to you or to put some emotion over on you. I dislike to be thought of as preaching. May I therefore, speaking simply in the first person, and as one of those "who have not seen and yet have believed," tell you some of the reasons which lead me to accept this Easter Beatitude.

I believe in the life hereafter which I have not seen because I believe in the integrity of those parts of life here which I can not see. Suppose that we were to take the attitude toward our life in this world which Thomas took toward his risen Lord, and were to say that we would believe only what we can handle and see, just how much would we have left? By that test man would be found to be a bundle of various material elements which could be bought today in the store for about a dollar. If we watched him we would see that he moved like other locomotive beings which we call animals. We would see that he is somewhat larger than the ape which he resembles in features, much less clear of eye and dull of ear than some of the beasts of the field, far less strong than the ox, somewhat longer lived than the horse,—in short, a moderate-sized mediocrely equipped animal. Such is a man by the Thomas test of the physical senses.

But watch him a bit further. Yonder he goes up the street. What motivates him? Is he hungry and hunting for food? No, he may have just had his lunch. Is he

following some object which he sees? No, perhaps he is not observing anything in his environment. Does he scent something in the air which he seeks? No, probably he is not conscious for the moment of his olfactory organ. Does he hear something that frightens him from where he was or lures him to where he is going? No, even here in New York a man may walk along the street unmindful of the noise. Ah, I know what accounts for his motion. I am a psychologist who have been studying Behaviorism and I have seen how a dog moves his foot when it is scratched. That man is moving his feet up and down on the sidewalk because the pavement presses irritatingly on the soles of his shoes. But does that explain why he is going north rather than south? No, of course not. The incentives which motivate that man may reside not at all in his five physical senses. They may be love, or ambition, or hate or their like—invisible all of them, but nevertheless real.

Observe the man further. He reaches a house which he calls home. Its walls are hung with pictures. It is not enough for him to have a den or nest as the animals do simply to shelter his body. He has something in him that craves beauty and he will go without food sometimes to buy paintings. Yet paintings are only canvasses with colored liquids brushed on them, materials which could be bought for a paltry sum. But an artist with what we call genius put an idea into those paints. Genius, ideas—what are these? Things we can not handle and see—but nevertheless real, so real that we pay thousands of dollars for them.

It is Christmas Eve and your man joins with a group of little children who call him father, and around a blazing hearth they sing "Holy Night." Strange sounds those would seem to an animal. Trifling sensations they would seem when measured by Thomas' material tests—merely wave pulsations in the air beating against the ear drum.

But can you thus appraise the emotions and meaning of that song as sung by little children in the ears of their father? No, something is let loose into the atmosphere which we can not reach with the senses but it is nevertheless real, so real that some of us would give about all we possess to experience it again.

The most valuable and powerful elements in man's life here are invisible and intangible. Strange being this which we call man—which keeps pursuing unseen urges, peering around the corners of yesterday to see whence he has come and around the corners of tomorrow to discover whither he is going. Weird power is this which the imagination possesses enabling a man to build his castles in Spain while he is laying bricks in the Bronx. Someone has put into man "such stuff as dreams are made of." Someone has made him but "little lower than the angels." Dust are these bodies, and to dust they return, but in this earthly house of our habitation there is something that

> "Leaps life's narrow bars
> To claim its birthright with the hosts of heaven!
> A seed of sunshine that doth leaven
> Our earthly dulness with the beams of stars,
> And glorify our clay
> With light of fountains older than the Day."

Man is more than the sum of his senses. "Feeling, purposes, values make up our consciousness as much as sense-impressions. We follow up the sense-impressions and find that they lead into an external world discussed by science; we follow up the other elements of our being and find that they lead—not into a world of space and time, but surely somewhere." So speaks one of the most quoted scientists of our day, Professor A. S. Eddington of Cambridge. And because I believe with him that these invisible elements are an integral part of life here and must lead somewhere, I am disposed to believed in the possibility of a life beyond the realm of time and space.

A second ground for my belief in the life hereafter which I have not seen is that I believe in the integrity of this universe, even where I can not see. There are times, I confess, in which I am inclined to doubt the honesty of this world-order. I have had friends struck down by accidents through no fault of their own. I have seen towns destroyed by hurricanes and homes shaken down by earthquakes. I have seen the wicked prosper and the good suffer, and I too have felt that life is "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

But I have always been put to shame in such moods by two groups of persons, the great sufferers who through all their pain have preserved a belief in a beneficient Providence, and the great scientists who although perhaps not talking about spiritual matters have demonstrated an amazing confidence in the dependability of this physical universe.

Some time ago before the British Association of Science, Ramsay, the eminent physicist, began an address with these words: "The subject of my remarks to-day is a new gas. I shall describe to you later its peculiar properties, but it would be unfair not to put you at once into possession of the knowlege of its most remarkable property, which is that it has not yet been discovered." Here was a scientist who had such faith in the reliability of this universe that he staked his reputation in announcing the existence of a gas which had not yet been discovered. But he had observed phenomena which could be explained only on the basis of such a gas, and reasoning from what he had seen to what he had not seen he did not hesitate to postulate the necessary medium.

Similarly an American astronomer some few years ago observed certain movements in the heavenly bodies which could not be accounted for by anything which had yet been discovered. But knowing that the laws of the heavens are dependable he reasoned from what he would see to

what he could not see and announced to the world his belief that there was another planet swimming yonder somewhere in those illimitable spaces. Years passed. The scientist passed away. But the other day one of our powerful telescopes picked up new traces of that shy heavenly stranger, and now astronomers account that man blessed "who had not seen and yet had believed."

Science, the queen to whose sway our modern world now stands so subject, does not hesitate to declare her belief in things she has not seen on the basis of things she has seen. In fact, it is thus and only thus that science has enlarged her domain. Suppose that scientists had never seen a body of water, did not know that there were oceans, or lakes, or rivers, and an eagle should drop into their midst a fish. Those men of science, studying the gill-breathing apparatus of the fish, would conclude that here was an animal designed to live in some other environment than dry land, and they would thereupon agree that there must be somewhere such a medium.

Just as science postulates a gas to explain the phenomena of the laboratory, or a new planet to explain the movements of the stars, or a body of water to explain the existence of a fish, why is it not the part of wisdom to believe that there must be "a land which eye hath not seen and ear hath not heard," in order to explain the presence in man of the persistent and universal inclination towards it? For "this longing after immortality" is a normal appetite of the human soul, felt by the best minds in their healthiest moments. It is universal, being found among all races. It is persistent, haunting the twentieth century sage as well as the primitive savage. Can it be that the universe which keeps faith with the instincts of the bird by providing air in which to fly and with the instincts of the fish by furnishing water in which to swim has played most cruelly false to man by endowing him with this craving for eternity only to deny its gratification? The integrity of

the world would seem to be at stake in immortality. A heavenless universe would seem to be as deceptive and dishonest as a foodless one. And if this is a non-moral world order, how can we explain the rise of moral aspiration in man? It needs a moral universe and immortal life to explain man. And it is those who trust the integrity of the universe in its spiritual aspects and proceed to stake their lives upon it, it is they rather than the "practical men" of "common sense" who, according to one of our most eminent men of science, are entitled to sing:

"We are the music-makers
And we are the dreamers of dreams
Wandering by lone sea-breakers
And sitting by desolate streams;
World-losers and world-forsakers,
On whom the pale moon gleams
Yet we are the movers and shakers
Of the world forever, it seems."

Viewed in the large, life appears to bear out the beatitude "Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed."

A third reason for my belief in the life hereafter which I have not seen is that I believe in the integrity of Christ even where I can not see.

As one of the five hundred million who look to Jesus as Lord of life, I am impressed with his absolute sincerity and honesty as a teacher. When I see the young carpenter come back from his baptism at the hands of John to teach in the synagogue at Nazareth and hear him tell his fellow townsmen such plain unpleasant truths that they tried to throw him over the brow of the hill, when I listen to him shattering his fellow Israelites' complacent belief that they were the special favorites of God, when I watch him rebuke the fawning Pharisees even at the tables where they were entertaining him, when I hear him uttering

things that hurt his own beloved disciples; I realize that Jesus was a teacher who did not hesitate to say what he believed, whatever it might cost. He was not one who said comfortable things to make people feel good or feared to disillusion his listeners in regard to their cherished errors. If, therefore, he had not shared the belief in immortality he would have told his people. And it is to this fact he himself called attention when, on the last night of his life he looked with his disciples toward the life beyond the grave, and said, 'If it were not so I would have told you." He was asking them to face the tomorrows on the basis of his own frankness in the yesterdays. "Ye believe in God; believe also in me."

But perhaps although Jesus was honest in his belief, he too might have been mistaken? Well, we have had nineteen hundred years now to study the teachings of Jesus about this world which we can see. And if there is any one fact which grows more luminous as the centuries pass, it is that Jesus was right about the rules of living. Society grows more complex and artificial, but through the maze of human relationships the secret shines brighter that Jesus' principle of love is the only way by which men can dwell together in lasting amity. Business forms its billion dollar banks and individual incomes surpass the wealth of all first century Jerusalem,—but amid the vastness of them, it grows ever clearer that the principles of service laid down by the penniless teacher of Palestine must predominate if the world of finance is to be saved. Nations still go to war but in the seething cauldron of the last great conflict was distilled the crystal conviction that the Jesus' way of life is the only program for governments as well as for persons. The test of the ages tells us that Jesus was not mistaken about the world this side of the grave. If we have found him so utterly reliable in the life here which we can see, shall we not trust him in regard to the life which we have not seen, for be it remembered that in

the teachings of Jesus the two hang together? Fundamental to all Jesus' gospel is the Fatherhood of God, and if God is a Father, immortality is inevitable. "If ye being evil know how to give good gifts, how much more shall your Heavenly Father give to them that ask him." It is unthinkable in fatherhood to deny this deepest desire of the heart.

Therefore on the basis of Jesus' integrity, I am disposed to believe him when I hear him say "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so I would have told you, for I go to prepare a place for you."

I can not close this personal testimony without pointing toward a fourth ground of belief in the life hereafter. It is that I have observed evidences of the Easter experience.

Before me lie the written testimonies as recorded by this Book. To be sure, it is not easy for me to believe but it is harder for me to disbelieve. The night before Jesus' crucifixion his disciples were demoralized. They were in despair at his approaching death. Despite his assuring words they were apparently not convinced. The day after his death, his followers prepared to leave Jerusalem. Their enterprise had collapsed. Their Master had departed from the scene of activity. All was over. But as two of them were leaving along the Emmaus road they were disturbed by a Presence that thrilled them and convinced them that He was the risen Christ. That same Presence made himself felt to the broken-hearted women who had gone out to the tomb to annoint his body. To the other disciples, the record says "he also showed himself alive after his passion by many proofs." Even the skeptical Thomas was convinced. And what is perhaps the most telling evidence of all is found in the letters of a scholarly Jew named Paul, a man of such sound and statesmanlike judgment that he is looked upon today as one of the chief builders of European civilization. Paul, writing to the

Corinthians said that Christ had appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve and then to above five hundred of the brethren "of whom the greater part remain alive."

If you can believe that hard-headed, healthy-minded men of the open air like the apostles, were changd from despair to confidence by an illusion or hallucination; if you can believe that the simple unpolished authors of the gospels, writing at different times and places, invented the Easter story; if you can believe that the Christian Church began by preaching a myth and has spread itself steadily over the earth by proclaiming a false hope and thereby producing such true souls as Francis of Assissi, Savonarola, and David Livingstone—then you can dismiss the gospel of Easter as incredible. But as for myself, I find it harder to discard it than to accept it.

Conclusive however, as it is, I do not believe Christ expected us to rest our faith in immortality merely on the record of his resurrection. Christ asked us to practice his precepts before trying to rest on his promises. "If any man willeth to do His (God's) will, he shall know of the teaching whether it is of God or whether I speak from myself." The assurance of immortality does not come from the mere reading of the gospel record or the hearing of Easter Sermons. We have to work our way into the understanding of immortal living as we have to work our way into the understanding of immortal music or immortal art. It is when we live most like Christ on this side of the grave that we come to feel most like Christ in regard to life beyond the grave. Some of us have gone far enough to test out this principle. We know that when we live the nearest to Christ, heaven seems nearest to us, and when we live least like him, death seems most dreadful.

Some of us have been close enough to the last hours of saintly souls to comprehend the feeling of that husband who wrote a letter published in this week's Christian Advocate in which he told of his wife's departure. She had

been saying a week before her death that the Lord had taken care of her all her life and she was confident that when she reached the door of eternity he would be there to take her home. The last breath was drawn. The graduate nurse applied the tests and pronounced her gone. And then says the husband: "We observed the most entrancingly beautiful sight we ever hope to see in this world. A slow smile of ineffable beauty passed across her face. * * * Had I been alone doubts would assail me and I could make myself think it was an optical illusion. But a nurse of long and highly technical experience, saw what I saw and got reactions similar to my own." I draw no conclusions from such a testimony. I offer it only as one man's impression. But when one has watched the last hours of many Christ-like characters as they draw near to the farther shore of this ocean of time, he begins to believe that to some of them there come "intimations of immortality" just as to the fellow-voyagers of Columbus there came the floating objects betokening the nearness of this western world.

It is by living that we 'lay hold on eternal life." It is by experience that we beget confidence in immortality. Striking is it indeed that Santayana, who leads modern philosophers in giving preeminent place to the authority of reason, should in his poetry express the place of action in relation to belief:

"O world, thou choosest not the better part.
It is not wisdom to be only wise,
And on the inward vision close the eyes,
But it is wisdom to believe the heart.
Columbus found a world, and had no chart
Save one that faith deciphered in the skies;
To trust the soul's invincible surmise
Was all his science and his only art.
Our knowledge is a torch of smoking pine
That lights the pathway but one step ahead
Across a void of mystery and dread.
Bid, then, the tender light of faith to shine
By which alone the mortal heart is lead
Unto the thinking of the thought divine."

And would we have it otherwise? If the unearned evidence of immortality were vouchsafed to us, it would reverse that principle of faith which runs through all courageous action as the red strand runs through the ropes of the British navy. The heroic set of the soul which in Abraham made him go out "not knowing whither he went," or which in a lone Lindbergh caused him to lift wing and fly into the unknown air of the Atlantic, is the same that enabled a Frohman on the deck of the sinking Lusitania to characterize death as "the finest form of adventure." "Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed." This manner of facing the unseen makes great living and great dying.

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